

Stocking project brightens Christmas for Tri-City kids

By Paula Horton, Herald staff writer



Sheila Davidson, CASA/GAL coordinator, holds up a pair of pajamas to add to other gifts being delivered to clients by James Hatley, a social worker for the Division of Child and Family Services. The collection of gifts filled offices in the Benton-Franklin Juvenile Justice Center in Kennewick. The "stocking project" helps about 250 children annually. See story below.

Christmas may be a little brighter for more than 260 young children in foster care in the Tri-Cities thanks to volunteers and a special "stocking project" organized by a Benton-Franklin juvenile court program.

It's a project that starts just after the new year for the volunteers who sew hundreds of stockings for the kids and have them ready to give to the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program in June.

The CASA/Guardian Ad Litem program uses specially trained volunteers to advocate for kids up to 8 years old who have been taken away from their parents and are dependents of the state.

The age and gender of each child represented by CASA is put on the stockings -- no names are provided because of the sensitivity of the cases -- then another batch of volunteers step in to fill the stockings with toys and goodies.

"It's really important that all these kids have a good Christmas," said Tina Perez, a CASA/GAL case manager. "We want to ensure every single child on our caseload ... will receive a gift."

For the past 10 years, that's exactly what the stocking project has accomplished. And, thanks to generous support from the community, older kids in the foster care system who aren't represented by the CASA program also get to receive some special Christmas gifts.

This year, for example, students at Chief Joseph Middle School in Richland took on a project to provide presents to junior high and high school kids, Perez said. The students collected gifts that they would be happy to get themselves -- a Quicksilver T-shirt, CDs and a soft cream-colored cardigan were just a few presents donated by the students.

"We get some really nice gifts," said Sheila Davidson, the CASA/GAL coordinator, as she stood in a juvenile justice center hallway lined with presents waiting to be picked up by social workers.

Boxes of presents and donated Barnes and Nobles bags filled with gifts also packed Perez's office. Among the groups that donated presents were employees at all three Applebee's restaurants and members of Bethel Church.

Then there's attorneys Mistee and Ryan Verhulp, who filled 80 stockings this year with the help of friends, family and co-workers. It's the fourth year the couple have bought presents to fill stockings.

"Every year it's grown -- the amount of stockings we're able to fill," said Mistee Verhulp, a partner with Smart, Connell, Childers & Verhulp in Kennewick. "Next year, we're trying to do 100."

Verhulp and her husband, Franklin County's chief civil deputy prosecutor, have worked in juvenile court or with the state Department of Social & Health Services in the past and knew CASA's stocking project was a perfect way for them to help out when they first heard about it.

"There's a lot of programs out there to help children, and around this type of year you're never quite sure what's legitimate and what's not," Verhulp said. "This is one of those programs where absolutely you know this is a child in need."

"While there might not be a financial need, definitely there's a psychological need. They need to know there's people out there who care and love them and help make their holiday a bit brighter," she added.

It's not too hard to pick up some extra gifts while out shopping and Verhulp said it's been a wonderful way to share a special lesson with the couple's two sons, ages 2 and 4.

"We're teaching our children how lucky they are by going out and helping buy gifts for children ... who are going through a very rough time in their childhood," she said. "These are children we know who are away from their families at Christmas time and it's just a way for our community to touch them."

The outpouring of support from volunteers providing presents also means Perez and Davidson often have extra gifts they can pull together to give to a social worker who knows there are other kids in the home with the foster child.

"Time after time after time we put the word out and they come," Perez said. "It's something that we're very proud of. We're very glad to be able to do this every year."

And, even though the stockings are filled and most of the presents have been delivered this year, community volunteers still can help out by signing up to be a CASA helper. Volunteers have to go through a special three-day training -- the next one's scheduled in January -- and then can be a voice for children in the court system.

The juvenile court program has three full-time and one part-time staff member and relies on volunteers for everything else, Perez said. In November, they served 359 children and have about 96 CASA volunteers working on active cases.

"We have several cases that we don't have assigned," Perez said. "We really, really need as many volunteers as we can get, that way every child can have a voice."

Anyone interested in finding out more about being a CASA volunteer can call Perez at 509-783-2151, ext. 2456.

-- Paula Horton: 509-582-1556; phorton@tricityherald.com